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ABSTRACT

This booklet examines and evaluates several programs to educate juveniles about the dangers involved in carrying weapons and to provide nonviolent routes to developing self-esteem and personal responsibility. The booklet is based on the experience of the Vera Institute and its partners in planning and testing a weapons education program in Brooklyn (New York) in 1996-97. It draws lessons from three programs in Detroit (Michigan), Indianapolis (Indiana), and the District of Columbia. Among the subjects discussed are: (1) defining the target population; (2) deciding when to intervene; (3) facing resistance; (4) making the program voluntary or mandatory; (5) developing program content and facilities; and (6) determining what to expect from a low-intensity, low-cost intervention. (SLD)

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Teaching Brain Power, Not Gun Power

Low-Intensity, Low-Cost Programs For Juvenile Weapons Offenders

Jennifer Trone, *Writer*
Darlene Jorif, *Planner*

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Teaching Brain Power, Not Gun Power

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Across America, first-time juvenile weapons offenders – kids charged with simple possession – pass through police stations, juvenile courtrooms, and probation offices almost unnoticed. Their cases do not make headlines or motivate legislation, but they raise serious questions: How hard should we punish kids who experiment with box cutters, razors, knives, and guns – especially those who arm themselves for protection? How else can we hold them accountable for their actions? And most important, how can we help them refuse weapons before they hurt someone?

These questions have led practitioners in a few jurisdictions to do something constructive with kids who are arrested on a simple weapons charge and released. What their programs offer these kids is a brief but hard look at gun violence and its victims, and an equally powerful message from caring adults to take nonviolent routes to safety, self-esteem, and personal responsibility. Participation in some of these programs is mandatory. In others, the court merely encourages juveniles to attend. Most are one-shot interventions – four hours on a Saturday morning in a Detroit courtroom, for example. They each operate with very limited budgets. The very best of them cannot change kids' lives; only sustained interventions can have such lasting effects. But the young people who participate have an opportunity to question their choice to carry a weapon and recognize the harm it can lead to. Early research suggests that even a four-hour educational program can change attitudes about guns. Equally important, these programs demonstrate that when kids do something illegal and dangerous, adults in positions of authority react quickly and with purpose.

This booklet is based on the Vera Institute's experience working with the New York City Family Court and its partners in the juvenile justice system to plan and test a weapons education program in Brooklyn during the winter of 1996–97. It also draws lessons from the design of three other programs with similar purposes: the Handgun Intervention Program in Detroit, Project LIFE (Lasting Intense Firearms Education) in Indianapolis, and Street Law's Save Our Streets Program in Washington, D.C. Both the program in Detroit and the one in Washington, D.C. are currently the subject of rigorous evaluations.

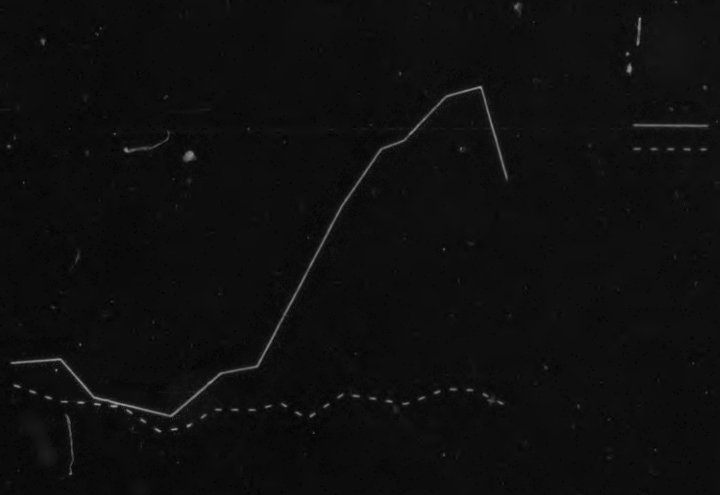
Future planners and managers of programs for this group of juvenile offenders – whether they work in policing, courts, probation, or nonprofit organizations – will be challenged to create meaningful but low-cost interventions. If these are your challenges, this booklet can help you get started.

Deadly Violence on the Rise

The stakes of adolescent violence are very high. Many young people carry guns, many are killed, and their peers who survive deadly confrontations are locked up, some of them for life. Over the past decade, the number of 14 to 17-year old known homicide offenders more than doubled, and the entire increase was the result of gun violence. Between 1988 and 1994, half of these offenders used handguns to kill. Two out of every three knew their victims – most of whom were young. In 1994, for example, 57 percent of victims of juvenile homicide offenders were under the age of 25.

Overall, as the number of young people killing rose, so did the number of young victims of gun violence. Between 1985 and 1995, the murder rate among kids ages 12 to 17 more than doubled. Again, nearly the whole increase was firearm related. In fact, since 1988, more than 80 percent of murder victims aged 15 to 19 were killed with a firearm, and in 1994 the number reached 90 percent. In other words, the highly publicized juvenile crime wave was primarily about gun violence among society's youngest members, and today's numbers, while down from the peak in 1994, are still high.

Known Juvenile Homicide Offenders by Gun, Nongun 1980 – 1995
(Based on FBI Supplementary Homicide Reports)



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How Big Is the Problem in Your Community? **It is often difficult to find out how many kids in your community are caught with weapons, because official counts do not capture reality. Schools do not keep reliable records of every incident. Police do not make an arrest or keep a record in every case. And even when they do, the weapons charge may be buried under other allegations. To put these numbers in context, debrief police officers after they finish their shift – ask them what they saw and how they responded. Gather informal reports from teachers and principals. And talk to kids. They are surprisingly honest, and their impressions of how many young people carry weapons, how many get caught, and what happens to them will yield another valuable estimate of prevalence.**

Who's In, Who's Out: Defining a Target Population

The programs described in this booklet target some of the easiest cases in juvenile court: kids with few or no prior arrests, "good" kids who made poor decisions and got caught but did not hurt anybody, kids who show up in court with their parents, the ones judges feel comfortable releasing. Their records may not reflect it, but many of them have had significant exposure to violence – as victims, witnesses, and aggressors – and are at great risk of additional violence. Many are also familiar with weapons, have access to them, and could easily pick up more dangerous ones.

Which kids get released and weeks or months later end up on probation differs dramatically from place to place. What they all have in common is that they suffer few or no consequences for their crimes, and they gain little or nothing from their contact with the juvenile justice system. Viewing them as "good" kids undermines thinking of their arrest as a significant event and using it as an opportunity to discourage unsafe behavior. While it may be useful to develop educational programs for more serious weapons offenders, the interventions we describe are not designed to operate in conjunction with incarceration or residential placement.

Stick, Knife, Gun: Why Not to Focus Exclusively on Kids Caught with Guns

Availability, price, the threat of punishment, knowledge, and personal experience influence whether a young person chooses to pick up a weapon and which one he or she reaches for on a given day. A girl caught with a knife on Monday might bring her brother's gun to a fight on Wednesday. A boy who carries a gun at night in his neighborhood could be arrested for bringing a box cutter to school. Focusing only on kids caught with guns means missing many other young people who have picked up a gun or who will do so in the near future. It also means that developing a gun prevention program for kids caught with other weapons makes sense. Each of the programs we describe focuses on gun violence, but only the Handgun Intervention Program limits participation to gun offenders. The others work with kids caught with any weapon.

Roll Call

People inside and outside government can run programs for first-time and nonserious juvenile weapons offenders. Probation and police departments, courts, and nonprofit organizations are all suitable hosts. Wherever they are located, programs that target juvenile offenders will benefit from involving others who work with these kids. This group usually includes representatives from the mayor or county executive's office, the police department, the judiciary, the prosecutor's office, the public defender's office, the department of juvenile probation, schools, and community-based youth organizations.

Bringing together these stakeholders early in the planning process is a good way to create a program with a broad base of local support. Winning everyone's cooperation, however, can be difficult. If it is impossible, get started anyway and expand your base of support gradually, as the program develops. But be prepared. Those who come on board later will object to many of the decisions that were made before they joined the group.

Before inviting others to help plan and manage the program, you should clearly define your target population, know how these kids' cases are currently handled, and become familiar with the different perspectives, needs, and resources of each potential partner. Once you are well informed, you will be able to explain to everyone involved why each person's participation is valuable. Some things to keep in mind:

The mayor or county executive's office has a unique ability to lead interagency initiatives.

Because police officers are a young offender's first point of contact with the criminal justice system, they are important gatekeepers of your program and proponents of its message. Patrol cops deal with kids every day, and in places where relations between the community and the police are good, they can steer kids in positive directions.

Judges, prosecutors, and defense lawyers can accommodate alternative practices but will be concerned about how the program changes the flow, processing, and outcomes of cases.

The department of juvenile probation operates a range of programs for juvenile offenders and can influence your program's content. In addition, depending on when you intervene, probation may play a role in the referral process.

Schools and community-based organizations have more contact with kids and more to offer them than anyone in the justice system. Consequently, they are a good source of information on the problems facing kids and on promising solutions. Representatives from these groups and institutions may also be willing to participate in your program as volunteer presenters. Most important, they provide places for kids to go once they finish your program.

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Faith and Tonya are sisters. Faith goes to high school in Brooklyn. Her sister Tonya attends middle school. Both make passing grades and have never been suspended. During a fight that broke out after school and involved several girls from the neighborhood, Tonya and Faith injured two girls with a scalpel. According to Faith and Tonya, the other girls started the fight and have threatened them in the past. The day after the fight, Faith and Tonya were arrested and charged with assault and criminal possession of weapon. The girls were not detained. At their arraignment, a Vera staff member encouraged Faith, Tonya, and their mother to attend a Juvenile Weapons Court session the following week.

When to Intervene

Working with Kids before Disposition

Catching a young person with a weapon provides a natural opportunity to prevent future violence. Therefore, moving kids through a weapons education program as soon as possible after they are arrested is important. The longer kids linger in the juvenile justice system without being affected by it, the less likely they are to take their arrest seriously; to consider the advice of police, judges, and other adults; or to change their behavior.

The desire to respond quickly led practitioners in Washington, D.C., Detroit, and New York City – busy urban jurisdictions with crowded court calendars – to develop interventions that target kids who have been charged with a weapons offense and released pending the disposition of their case. Because the charges have not been adjudicated, these programs do not ask kids to talk about their own cases. Instead, the programs present facts and real stories of gun violence and encourage kids to talk about situations and dilemmas involving weapons that they or their friends have confronted.

Working with Kids after Disposition

Project LIFE (Lasting Intense Firearms Education) in Indianapolis works with kids who have been found delinquent and placed on probation. Because their cases have been decided, the kids are free to talk about what happened. In fact, program leaders urge kids to recount the situation that led to their arrest, to accept responsibility, and to think out loud about what they could have done differently. Programs that get kids after disposition have to wait longer to intervene. Fast-tracking these weapons cases might help programs like Project LIFE reach kids more quickly.

Intervening before Arrest

Weapons education programs can be valuable in places where targeting offenders is impossible or appears futile based on the volume of arrests. Only a fraction of kids who own and carry weapons are arrested. And even the volume of arrests undercounts the number of kids known to carry weapons. While kids caught with guns are almost always arrested, young people wielding other dangerous tools often are not prosecuted. Reasons vary. Some school principals confiscate knives and other weapons but choose not to report the incident to the police. They may want to give students a second chance, or they may be concerned about protecting their school's reputation.

Court Records of Four Kids Who Attended the New York City Juvenile Weapons Court

Name	**Angel**
Age at Arrest	13
Arrested	12/9/96 Menacing – threatened to get a gun and use it
Incident	11/26/96
Arraigned	1/24/97 Released
Arrest History	11/20/96 Robbery – sealed 02/10/96 Criminal mischief – adjournment in contemplation of dismissal 5/10/96
School History	8th grade, special ed. 6 suspensions for fighting. 1 transfer.
Family History	Lives with his grandmother, his legal guardian. Mother deceased. Father Lives in Florida

Name	**Faith**
Age at Arrest	16
Arrested	09/27/96 Assault & criminal possession of a sculpe
Incident	09/26/96
Arraigned	02/05/97 Released
Arrest History	None
School History	10th grade, mainstream. No suspensions. Passing grades.
Family History	Lives with mother. Father lives in Boston Has been victimized by other girls in the neighborhood.

Name	**Hakeem**
Age at Arrest	15
Arrested	11/02/96 Robbery 2nd degree w/ toy gun, 3 counts
Incident	11/02/96
Arraigned	02/06/97 Released
Arrest History	None
School History	9th grade, regents and honors classes. No truancy or behavioral problems.
Family History	Lives with mother and stepfather. No contact with biological father.

Name	**Christopher**
Age at Arrest	14
Arrested	08/12/96 Criminal possession of two daggers
Incident	08/12/96
Arraigned	01/24/97 Released
Arrest History	None
School History	8th grade, special ed. Mostly truant.
Family History	Lives with mother, who describes him as depressed. Was in counseling. Denies drug or alcohol use.

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Similarly, a police officer who catches a kid with a knife may take it and dismiss the young person with a verbal warning. What seems like an obvious solution – to arrest and prosecute every juvenile caught with a weapon – may not be practical or possible. An alternative response is to develop a weapons education program for kids who otherwise would simply walk away. The right intervention could make getting caught as significant as being arrested.

Facing Resistance

Programs that operate at any juncture in the juvenile justice process can be quick to intervene and meaningful if they are fully supported by local criminal justice agencies. But marshaling support can be difficult. Future planners of weapons education programs should anticipate resistance from defenders, prosecutors, judges, and probation officers.

Proposals to work with kids who have not been found delinquent often receive a cold response from defense attorneys. According to Jeff Chinn, former director of Save Our Streets, a project of Street Law, Inc. in Washington, D.C., "Defense attorneys will always oppose preadjudication programs because they worry that the program will hurt rather than help their clients." To these lawyers, the risks appear greater than the benefits: *What if my client describes committing a crime? Will judges penalize my client if she refuses to attend, even if attendance is not mandatory?* Defense attorneys may also resist post-adjudication programs that depend on fast-tracking some weapons cases. Facing accelerated schedules, defense attorneys may ask: *Will I be able to investigate these cases properly?*

To win the support of defense attorneys in Washington, D.C., Save Our Streets educates them about the program and agrees to provide the court with reports on those kids who complete the program – narratives that can be very helpful at disposition. Chinn notes that most defense attorneys still voice principled objections to the program in court, but do not actively discourage their clients from participating. In Chinn's opinion, as defense lawyers become more familiar with the program and as the program gains credibility based on its work, resistance lowers. In fact, a few defenders have volunteered to present information at SOS sessions.

Some prosecutors may withhold support because they fear that the program will make it easier for judges to release kids who should be detained. Usually, tightening eligibility criteria can satisfy their concerns. For example, one prosecutor gave his approval when the

program planner agreed to exclude any juvenile apprehended with a loaded gun.

Programs that clearly define the roles and responsibilities of judges and juvenile probation officers – officials accustomed to making or enforcing orders – are more likely to win their support. Voluntary programs, especially those that intervene pretrial, may raise red flags.[1] In the words of one judge: *Why should I recommend the program if I won't know whether the kid showed up, and I can't consider attendance at sentencing?* Of course, judges can and do consider a variety of factors at sentencing, and program planners will have to decide whether to provide judges with attendance lists and information about participation, as Save Our Streets does. Judges and probation officers who receive such reports, however, may demand clarity about what they are expected to do when someone either fails to attend or completes the program successfully.

The New York City Juvenile Weapons Court **In February and March of 1997, the New York City Family Court and the Vera Institute tested an experimental Juvenile Weapons Court. Kids who had been arrested in Brooklyn, charged with a weapons offense, and released pending the disposition of their cases were eligible, but not required, to attend. Each three-hour session took place in an unoccupied courtroom on a Saturday afternoon. The program mixed personal stories of gun violence, stern advice, and heavy doses of concern and inspiration. The goal: to make an impression on kids who still have choices.**

Does Making it Mandatory Matter to Kids?

As Vera and the New York City Family Courts planned to test what would be a voluntary program, one of our concerns was whether kids would show up. Family court judges in Brooklyn and the Juvenile Weapons Court coordinator could encourage kids to attend, but judges could not threaten to punish those who chose not to come. Vera agreed not to give the court information about attendance. What we found is that nearly everyone we referred showed up.

Save Our Streets and Project LIFE work with kids who are required to be there, and whose attendance the court monitors. The directors of both programs estimate that three out of every four kids ordered to attend show up. Getting kids to come to a weapons education program may depend less on requiring attendance, however, than on reminding them where to go and when. Vera planners found that it is essential to contact kids just prior to the session. Save Our Streets and Project LIFE do the same. Among kids who attend the first meeting of Save Our Streets, 60 percent will complete the entire 15-week program. Bebs Chorak, deputy director for programs at Street Law, Inc., believes that future participation depends on making a good first impression, and she encourages her staff to make the initial session lively, engaging, and interactive.

1 In jurisdictions like New York City, where probation officers screen juvenile defendants long before judges review the cases, involving probation in the referral process is an obvious way to ensure early intervention.

The Handgun Intervention Program, Detroit **More than 5,000 juveniles and young adults – mainly African American males – charged with carrying a concealed weapon have been required to attend this three-hour program as a condition of bond. Created four years ago by a charismatic African American judge named Willie Lipscomb, the program juxtaposes photographs and testimonies about gun violence with images of historic leaders who dedicated their lives to improving the lives of others. Originally developed to serve adult offenders, since 1996, the program has been attended by many juveniles. Some of these kids have been required to attend; others have participated voluntarily. The Urban Institute is evaluating the program.**

Since the Handgun Intervention Program was expanded to include younger participants, some have been mandated and others have received a voluntary referral, but their attendance has not been documented. Among participants 17 years and older, who are required to attend as a condition of bond, 75 percent show up.

Developing Content: The Message and the Messenger

For people who run weapons education programs, the challenge is to make a big enough impression on kids so that they carry something home with them. Images of bloody bodies. Scenes from an autopsy. The voice of a survivor confined to a wheelchair. The names and ambitions of three young men shot in Brooklyn. The tired eyes of their mother. The urgent advice of a cop whose nephew died as a result of making a few quick and very wrong decisions.

Whether your program works with kids one afternoon for a few hours or weekly over a few months, the challenge is the same. No length of time is ever enough. An hour can be worthwhile. But to make an impact on even a few of the young people who participate, the messages you deliver have to be clear and credible, and your program has to build bridges that connect kids with family members and community groups who can help them stay safe, strong, and away from weapons.

The Message to Kids:

- Gun violence hurts the victims, their families, and entire communities.
- Guns cannot protect you.
- Being involved in gun violence will change your whole life.
- There are adults who care and can help you find nonviolent ways to solve problems.

Keep It Real: Mixing Tragedy and Hope

Kids are a tough audience. They have short attention spans, and they cannot be fooled by false sentiments or persuaded by speeches. According to one boy who participated in the New York City Juvenile Weapons Court, the best presenter "kept it real." He was referring to Wilson Murphy, a young man who was shot seven times by gunmen sent to kill someone he was talking to. Mr. Murphy, who can no longer walk, described lying on the sidewalk, bleeding and unable to move. He talked about the physical wreckage the bullets caused as they tore through his body and the many operations he survived. He also pointed out that during the five years he was hospitalized and away from his family, his daughter grew from a baby to a young girl

"Three Brothers and Two Cousins" by Frances Davis

My name is Rafeal. I dreamed of becoming an architect, getting married, and having a family. I enjoyed music, places, and my family. But my dreams ended on June 7th, 1987, when I was shot and killed because I refused to give up money that I had earned. I was only 20 years old.

My name is Andrew Saunders. I dreamed of becoming a computer analyst and raising my two sons to manhood. I loved cars, motorcycles, computers, and family. But my dreams ended November 1991, after a brief altercation on the street. I was shot four times and died twelve days later. I never regained consciousness. I was only 22 years old.

My name is Frankie Davis. I was not sure of my goals. I was trying to cope with the senselessness of losing my two older brothers. I may have become a great comedian because I had the gift to make people laugh, especially my mother. I loved video games, music, sports, girls, and my family. But I will never know what I could have become because my dreams ended on July 6th, 1993, when I got caught in crossfire. I was only 18 years old.

My name is Dwayne Boone, but mostly I was called Butter. I was in my freshman year of college, and I made average grades. I was the father of three children, and I wanted to become a writer. I played basketball. I loved video games, college, and my family. But my dreams ended on January 5th, 1996, when someone shot and killed me and my cousin. I don't have a clue why they did this. I was only 21 years old.

My name is Glennis Saunders, but they called me Weeda. I was in high school. I played basketball and won numerous trophies. I dreamed of graduation, writing, and singing rap music. I loved school, girls, boys, video games, music, and family. But my dreams also ended on January 5th, 1996, when someone shot me.

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and his son changed from a boy to a teenager. At one point, he stopped his story, looked at the kids in the courtroom, and said,

> Let me ask you all something, just give me your honest opinion, do you actually think that you can put somebody like this [gesturing to himself] and be happy with yourself? Look at me. When your butt starts hurting, you get up and shake it off. I'm sitting in this wheelchair every day, all day. I'm doing fifteen hours a day in this chair. I didn't come out here to judge no one. I came out here to open your eyes to reality. I don't want no one in this room to go through what I went through. 'Cause that's a living nightmare. I took seven bullets. Let me tell you, that's not the move.

Project LIFE, Indianapolis

Created in 1991 by the juvenile court, Project LIFE (Lasting Intense Firearms Education) targets kids who receive probation for committing a weapons crime. Attendance is mandatory. Sessions, which are held every six weeks, are limited to ten kids and their parents. Discussion focuses on the situations that led to each juvenile's involvement with weapons and to his or her arrest. The program also includes video documentation of a homicide scene and an autopsy, a presentation by a woman whose son was killed during a drive-by shooting, and a film about kids who were involved in gun violence.

Project LIFE delivers a series of dark messages intended to disrupt kids' complacent attitudes about experimenting with guns. Participants see unedited police footage from a homicide scene where a boy was shot in the head. They listen to the director of a funeral home. They see a film about young victims and perpetrators of gun violence. And then the message hits closer to home as a woman from Indianapolis holds up a photograph of her son, introduces him, and describes how he was killed in a drive-by shooting. She mentions many of her son's good qualities and many of his faults, and she talks about where he used to hang out, places that may be familiar to the kids in the program.

In Detroit, facilitators of the Handgun Intervention Program get real from the start in some very specific ways. They dress like the participants and talk like them. Early on, they ask participants, *How many of you think that carrying a gun makes you safe?* Then they work hard to break down this myth by arguing that people who choose to carry guns and step into "the life" are more likely to put themselves and those they love in dangerous situations. The idea is to get the participants on the right track before their lives spin out of control. But convincing them is not easy. Many live in very dangerous neighborhoods and come to the program with firsthand experience of gun violence. At one session, for example, 39 out of 40 participants knew someone who had been shot, and 8 had survived gunshot wounds. Yet, they all chose to carry a gun.

Part of the answer lies in sending positive messages. Judge Willie Lipscomb, creator of the Handgun Intervention Program, focuses his presentation on empowerment. He calls participants "ambassadors" and talks about how they are the solution – not only to their own troubles but also to the biggest problems facing their communities.

"We're trying to inspire young men to take responsibility for their own destiny and for the future of their communities." The Honorable Willie G. Lipscomb, Jr., creator of the Handgun Intervention Program

Guns and Violence will kill our people! Therefore, I claim my heritage as a leader and disavow Gun Violence. Vow of Nonviolence read aloud and signed by participants of the Handgun Intervention Program

His message is personal responsibility and community allegiance. The judge's charismatic presence is inspiring, probably especially for young African American men who can view him as a role model. What Judge Lipscomb says is reinforced by slides of historic leaders, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. At the end of the session in Detroit, participants read aloud and sign a vow of nonviolence. Similarly, Save Our Streets challenges kids to question the role of weapons in their community and to reconsider their own relationship to the law and with those who enforce it. Since practicing nonviolence is harder than thinking about it, program facilitators also offer practical advice about how to avoid conflicts or solve them without resorting to violence.

Another way to *keep it real* is to involve young people as presenters. During the New York City Juvenile Weapons Court, members of the Greater Brownsville Youth Council, a community-based organization in Brooklyn, used improvisational theater to dramatize situations familiar to many of the participants. In the first skit, a teenage boy asks his girlfriend to hold his loaded gun in school, because according to him, "They don't check girls." Later, when a dean in the lunchroom discovers the gun, the two try to explain:

Boy You heard about my brother getting stabbed and everything, and now the cats are talking about me! It's not like I was gonna go straight off and shoot 'em, but if something went down, at least I'd have protection.

Dean I told you not to bring a weapon to school. I told you that if anything happens, you come to me. What if someone had been hurt in the lunchroom?

Girl Nothing happened. I forgot I had it 'til my friend Charmaigne pulled it out of my bag.

Dean So now you're gonna get in trouble for him? You're smarter than this.

Boy Look, I need a gun. School security can't save me when I'm getting my butt kicked. Let's just end this.

Dean What do you mean, "End this?" If I let you two off, then other kids will bring guns to school. And when something terrible happens, it will be on my hands.

Boy But I've got a scholarship coming up. I'm a senior. I can't afford to go down like this.

Dean You should have thought about that before you brought this gun into this school.

The second skit pairs two brothers, ages 19 and 16. The older boy, the family's financial support, is involved in criminal activity and violence. The younger one is trying to follow a different path but finds himself enmeshed in his older brother's way of life. In the skit, the two argue after the 16-year-old finds their six-year-old brother playing with a loaded gun his older brother left on the kitchen table. Following each skit, the Juvenile Weapons Court participants questioned the actors, who remained in character, about their feelings and choices.

Picking a Physical Space

The Handgun Intervention Program takes place in a courtroom. SOS sessions are held in a large jury assembly room. Kids who attend Project LIFE gather in a small meeting room in the juvenile court building.

Buildings and rooms send messages to kids. Courthouses and courtrooms, for example, feel formal, official, and authoritarian. Kids who gather in these places may take the program and the justice system more seriously. On the other hand, they may become distracted because the room is too large and impersonal, or because they are too far away from the presenters. Small rooms feel claustrophobic to some people, and comfortable to others. Kids who gather in smaller, less formal settings may participate more but not feel in contact with the justice system. Programs that focus on interaction among kids and between kids and presenters should probably take place in rooms that allow for movement of both people and furniture. Wherever you locate your program, it is important to watch how kids are reacting to the physical space and then make whatever adjustments you can to make the space more functional.

Street Law's Save Our Streets Program, Washington, D.C. **Save Our Streets works with 13 to 17-year-olds charged with any weapons offense who are released pending disposition. Judges order kids to participate in this highly interactive 15-week program that features peer education and involves police officers, lawyers, judges, policy specialists, and community leaders. For two hours each Saturday morning, kids learn how guns affect them and their communities, and they explore ways to be safe without guns – primarily, how to resolve conflicts verbally. Participants also learn about the law and their rights. The program provides the court with attendance lists and submits letters of support for everyone who graduates.**

Connecting Kids with Youth Groups, Police, and Parents

Involving community-based organizations like the Greater Brownsville Youth Council in programs for weapons offenders provides an opportunity for kids to learn about an interesting organization they can join. Representatives from several other community-based youth groups made brief presentations during the New York City Juvenile Weapons Court, and each participant received a copy of the Options Guide, which lists contact information and a brief description of eleven local youth organizations. The introduction to the *Guide* states:

> By joining one of these organizations, you can discover opportunities to better yourself, your peers, and your community. Choosing

How to Keep Costs Low **The programs we describe have one major expense: salary for a coordinator. The coordinator works with the program's partners in the justice system to create a referral process, manage intake, and schedule sessions. He or she also recruits and trains presenters. Some start-up programs can rely on a volunteer coordinator, but in the long run, most will have to develop a paid position. Other necessary resources are free. An unused courtroom, office, or classroom, for example, may be donated. Many people, inside and outside government, will gladly volunteer to present information. And both public and private agencies have high-quality materials, such as homicide photos or films about gun violence, that you can borrow.**

> constructive and beneficial activities will also decrease your chances of becoming involved in situations that can threaten your life and your freedom.

None of the programs we describe track kids after their initial, and usually brief, intervention. Continued follow-up would require additional resources, and most jurisdictions are unwilling to devote a higher level of funding to programs that target the least serious weapons offenders. Lacking resources to track kids makes it particularly important to involve local youth groups that can sustain contact with kids who express an interest in their program.

Involving police officers as presenters can improve relations between kids and the officers who patrol their communities. Many kids have reasons to think of cops as the enemy. But watching and hearing an officer talk about how gun violence has affected her own family may soften their views. The next time an officer walks by, these kids may see more than just a uniform. Maybe, the next time they need help, they will ask a neighborhood cop. In the long run, young people who have positive interactions with the police develop a respect for the criminal justice system that is often absent in poor and minority communities today. For this reason, many programs for juvenile weapons offenders also involve prosecutors, defense attorneys, probation officers, and judges.

Officer Laverne Yard, who spoke at the Juvenile Weapons Court, talked about relations between cops and kids:

> Some of the young people I work with say, "I don't like police, but you're okay, Officer Yard." What makes me different is that they got to know me as a person. What I'm here to tell you is that you should hold everyone up to the light and examine them, and then you make the determination. And that's what I tell the officers I work with. I tell them that not all young men who wear their hats turned backwards and their pants hanging down are hoods. Not all of them cut school. Some of them could be A students. You young people have choices in life. And yeah, there's something out there that you call a 5-0 that you may think is against you, but there are a whole lot out there who are not.

The programs we describe strongly encourage parents or other legal guardians to participate. They try to involve parents because parents have more opportunities than anyone else to reinforce the program's messages long after it ends. Programs also assume that kids

will take their own involvement more seriously if their parents come along. One caution: Programs that depend more on group discussion than on presentations should consider the possibility that involving parents will discourage kids from speaking freely and honestly.

Working with Volunteers

Finding local people who will volunteer to present stories and information greatly reduces the cost of running a program for juvenile weapons offenders and makes it possible to offer a wide range of voices and perspectives, even to a small group of kids. It also means that the presenters can talk about places that are familiar to the kids in the program. All of the programs we describe rely on volunteers. The challenge is to make sure that each person conveys the program's core messages. It is important to select people who have something unique to offer. At the same time, they have to agree with your program's philosophy and be able to tailor their presentations to fit your needs. Even those people who seem perfect will need some coaching, so it is important to reserve time to adequately train volunteers. Programs that operate sessions frequently may have to recruit enough volunteers so that no one has to attend every session.

Guidelines for Presenters:

- Talk about how gun violence has affected your life.
- Describe a place in your community where kids may feel a need to carry a gun and suggest an alternative response.
- Say something positive about kids.
- Suggest at least one thing kids can do to avoid violence and improve their lives.
- If your agency operates programs for kids, talk about these programs and tell kids how to get involved.
- Provide opportunities for kids to ask questions and share stories.

Impact: What to Expect from a Low-Intensity, Low-Cost Intervention

Planners and funders of weapons education programs who are honest and modest about what their programs can achieve will be most satisfied with their work and investment. At best, brief interventions are a catalyst for future change. They can enliven kids. If the messages are clear and the people involved are interesting and inspire positive thinking, then the event can be a symbolic moment in the lives of kids who attend. And at least for a little while, they will remember, and maybe believe, what they heard.

Research by the Urban Institute on the Handgun Intervention Program suggests that older teens and young adults who attend that program express much stronger and more accurate opinions about gun-related issues than a randomly selected group of offenders who qualified for the program but were placed in a control group.[2] Surveys of participants' attitudes were collected not more than two weeks after they attended the program. What this means is that, at least in the short term, these individuals really think about the effects of choosing to carry a gun. Most young people never think before they reach for a weapon, never think before they use one. Similar research on Save Our Streets will be completed in January 1998.

Brief interventions have other benefits. They are observation laboratories in which adults can learn more about why kids arm themselves and what else government and communities can do to discourage adolescent violence. In addition, mounting and operating this type of program can improve communication and encourage collaboration among juvenile justice agencies and between the justice system and the community. Finally, any program that takes seriously the crimes of even the least dangerous weapons offenders will boost public confidence in the juvenile justice system.

2 This research is restricted to participants 17 years and older. The average age of people in the experimental group is 26.

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The Vera Institute of Justice is a private nonprofit organization dedicated to making government policies more fair, humane, and efficient for all people. Working in close collaboration with government officials, Vera designs and implements innovative programs that encourage just practices in public services and improve the quality of urban life. Vera operates demonstration projects in partnership with government, conducts original research, and provides technical assistance to public officials in New York and throughout the world.

Vera has participated in efforts to rehabilitate juvenile offenders since 1968 when the Institute created the Court Employment Project to offer them counseling, job training, and employment instead of time in detention. At the same time, Vera established a research presence in the field by studying violence among juvenile delinquents and the relationship between youth employment and crime. For more information about ongoing work in juvenile justice, contact Molly Armstrong at the Institute's main office.

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